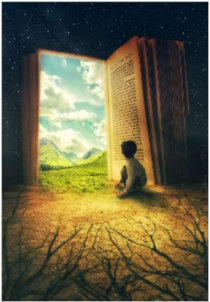


Invitation to Christian Discipleship
By Bill Lawson

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Everyone is invited to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. Everyone, regardless of who they are, what they believe, or what they do, is invited to share the love, vision, and mission of Jesus. Christian discipleship begins with the Holy Spirit, as she allures people to explore the life and teachings of Jesus as part of their personal spiritual journey. Discipleship is offered as an invitation and accepted as a response. The first response to this universal invitation is different for everyone. For some, it starts at birth in a Christian family. For others, it begins when they cross paths with someone who shares a meaningful faith experience. Sometimes, the response begins during a conversation or reading, perhaps a sermon, song, prayer, Bible reading, or Holy Communion during a worship service. For some, it may begin in an act of kindness, through a friendship, or in some other encounter with God in Christ.

We each grow into our personal relationship with Christ at our own pace as we choose to continue responding to God's invitational calling in our lives. Paul wrote, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."¹ This *hearing* is more than the audible tones. It is the impression being made in our souls. Through all the various means God communicates grace and love, we learn the teachings and discover the example of Jesus. And we choose whether to implement them in our lives.

Love is the main principle Jesus taught. He even encouraged a love for our enemies. He taught constant forgiveness as the heart of love. He elevated the Old Testament laws of love as the basis of interpreting all the Scriptures. Despite much traditional dogma to the contrary, Jesus told Nicodemus that love is the reason God sent Christ to be our savior, as we often quote in John 3:16-17,

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.²

The vision of Jesus is that all people will live together in peace and harmony, in the unity of love. For Christ, this is expressed as an everlasting vision that transcends even death and continues throughout eternity. Jesus demonstrated God's fully inclusive love for everyone. He insisted especially on including those who were being excluded by the religious community of his time.

The mission of Jesus, variously stated, is salvation, liberation, and wholeness. "I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly,"³ he declared. Our part in that mission is to reflect God's love and to extend the invitation to discipleship in our encounters with other people. He said in the Great Commission as phrased in the Good News Translation. "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples."⁴

The invitation of Jesus stirs a compelling desire deep within us.

And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him. (*Matthew 9:9 KJV*)

Jesus invited people to follow him. Some accepted his invitation, and others rejected it. The "Rich Young Ruler" story in the Bible tells of a young man who "went away grieved"⁵ as he decided not to accept the invitation because he valued his earthly treasures more than the spiritual opportunities

Jesus offered. Conversely, Matthew immediately stood up and began his new life of following Jesus. The Bible doesn't mention what happened to his tax table or who took his old job. Similarly, Jesus invited the four fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, to follow him.⁶ Like Matthew, these four immediately left their nets and began their new spiritual journey of following Jesus. Another tax collector, Zacchaeus, stayed in his job but with a commitment to a new life following Christ spiritually and changing how he treated people.

The invitation for everyone comes from Christ in similar terms as he spoke in the Bible, "Follow me" to some, or "Come unto me" as in the Great Invitation:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.⁷

Matthew was *persona non grata* in both the social and religious communities. The religious leaders complained because Jesus not only tolerated, not only accepted, but intentionally loved and personally *invited* the very people whom the religious community was adamantly excluding. Jesus sincerely and very much *wanted* them to participate fully in his mission, ministry, and fellowship. Jesus responded to his critics in a way that earned him another title, the "Great Physician," because he said, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick."⁸

Which begs the question, "Sick of what?" The next verse is often used to denigrate further and mischaracterize those whom Jesus invites to follow him. "But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."⁹ But Jesus was pointing out, as he did on several other occasions, that his critics were the ones who were missing the point. It was they whose merciless conduct in the name of religious values were the ones who needed to go off and learn what the Scriptures really meant. They had a sick and sinful way of excluding people from full participation in the secular and religious community under the guise of a false orthodoxy. Paul later wrote, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."¹⁰

So, again, "Sick of what?" Sick of the same kinds of evil, injustice, and oppression we vow in our baptismal covenant to resist. Maybe sick of sin being defined in terms that divide people into categories designed to exclude further and oppress the most vulnerable populations. Maybe sick of racism. Maybe sick of gun violence. Maybe sick of discrimination. Maybe sick of human trafficking and child exploitation. Maybe sick of making up new ways to cause harm and take away other people's rights. Maybe sick of, as Jesus identified in the Sermon on the Mount, people judging others in the name of religion. He asked, as translated in the Good News Translation, "Why, then, do you look at the speck in your [sibling's] eye and pay no attention to the log in your own eye?" In The Message, that verse reads, "It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own."¹¹

Maybe sick of that. The Great Physician came to heal us all from the sin-sick effects of not loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We are invited to be a blessing to others.

And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. (*Genesis 12:2 KJV*)

God invited Abraham to go to another country and start all over. Like Matthew leaving his tax table, Abraham left his old life behind and went where he was sent, not sure how it would all work out but

trusting God anyway. Abraham and Sarah were promised innumerable descendants, “as numerous as the stars of heaven,”¹² as phrased in the New Revised Standard Version, even though they were at an advanced age for having children. While that part of the promise was perhaps most important to Sarah and Abraham, even more importantly in retrospect for all the world is the promise of this passage that “in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”¹³

Viewing our faith heritage through that lens of blessing everyone on earth brings the role of the Church in the world today into sharper focus. God promised to bless not only Sarah and Abraham and their descendants but everyone else through them. Likewise, the Law of Moses was intended to constitute a nation that would not only be blessed by God but would also be a blessing to the other nations of the world. Similarly, God’s purpose for the Church is not just that we would be blessed by following Christ but that our community and world would also be blessed through us. Echoing what Jesus said to Nicodemus, we are not here to judge or condemn anyone but to unite everyone in the salvific healing love of Jesus.¹⁴

God equates faith with righteousness.

And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. (*Romans 4:22 KJV*)

Abraham, through faith, “was accepted as righteous by God.” (*Romans 4:22 GNT*)

Abraham accepted God’s invitation. Abraham believed in God’s promises and in his personal relationship with God. Those were harsh times, as we read about in the Bible. Some of the things we have been studying about the book of Genesis in our Bible Study group raise more questions than answers and pose some interesting challenges. Paul’s letters don’t really get into the weeds so much with Abraham. Instead, Paul uses Abraham’s relationship with God as a metaphor for our relationship with Christ. Because Abraham believed God, his faith was “imputed to him for righteousness.” Likewise, because we believe Jesus, God counts that as our righteousness. If God counts us as righteous, then maybe we should consider looking at the people around us through the same lens.

God’s love is already there wherever we may go.

[God] loveth righteousness and judgment: the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord. (*Psalms 33:5 KJV*)

[God] loves whatever is just and good; the earth is filled with [God’s] tender love. (*Psalms 33:5 TLB*)

The psalmist affirms God’s love for humanity in words strikingly familiar to those of the prophet Micah in the Good News Translation, “The Lord has told us what is good. What [God] requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.”¹⁵ From beginning to end, the Bible affirms that God loves everyone, troublesome passages, and even more troubling interpretations to the contrary notwithstanding. The teachings and example of Jesus make it abundantly clear that, as the psalmist affirms, “the earth is filled with [God’s] tender love.”

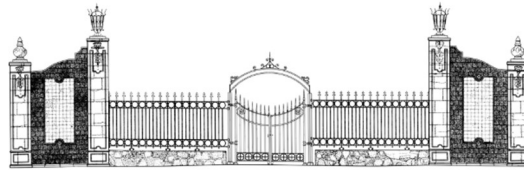
Conclusion

We and all people are offered the same personal invitation of Christ as Matthew and others in the Bible, “Follow me.” It isn’t possible for us to follow Jesus physically, but his first followers only were able to do so at the very beginning of their discipleship. Most of their lives were spent following Jesus

spiritually, just like we are invited to do. We feel the Holy Spirit moving within and among us. Her love stirs our hearts, drawing us ever more deeply into our relationship with Christ and each other. Just as Jesus promised, she teaches and guides us to respond to the impressions she makes in our hearts and minds, constantly inviting us – “wooing us to heaven,” as Philip Bliss wrote in his hymn, “Wonderful Words of Life.”¹⁶

The invitation to Christian discipleship is not a one-and-done *demand* but a continuing *attraction*, new and fresh every day. I hear the invitation of Jesus not like a *command* but like the lyrics of John Denver’s *love song* with the same title, “Follow Me.”¹⁷ Don’t you just want to take Jesus’ hand?

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



Invitation to Christian Discipleship

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Bible Readings for the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5), Revised Common Lectionary
Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 4:18-25; Matthew 9:9-13

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Notes

¹ Romans 10:17 (KJV).

² John 3:16-17 (KJV).

³ John 10:10 (KJV).

⁴ Matthew 28:19 (GNT).

⁵ Mark 10:22 (KJV).

⁶ Matthew 4:18-22 (KJV).

⁷ Matthew 11:28-29 (KJV).

⁸ Matthew 9:12 (KJV).

⁹ Matthew 9:13 (KJV).

¹⁰ Romans 3:23 (KJV).

¹¹ Matthew 7:3 (GNT, MSG).

¹² Genesis 26:4 (NRSV).

¹³ Genesis 12:3 (KJV).

¹⁴ John 3:16-17.

¹⁵ Micah 6:8 (GNT).

¹⁶ Philip P. Bliss. "Wonderful Words of Life," 1874. *Hymnary*.

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¹⁷ Denver, John. "Follow Me," 1970. ©1970 Reservoir Media Music and BMG Ruby Songs.

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